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# Lorene Cary

## Biography

Lorene Cary was born November 29, 1956 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her parents were John and Carole (Hamilton) Cary. As a young African-American woman, Cary, guided by her mother, enrolled in the formerly all-white, all-male St. Paul's preparatory school in New Hampshire. There, beginning in 1972, Cary confronted the inner conflict that eventually inspired her bestseller *Black Ice*, and remained a continuous theme in her subsequent works *The Price of a Child* and *Pride*.

How best could Cary hold on tightly to her African-American culture while being educated and working within the white man's system? Would she, in an academy where the walls still housed the ghosts of segregation, sell out and abandon her heritage? Ellen Goodman of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* describes *Black Ice* as a book about "being black in a quintessentially white world, female in a male environment, scrape-by middle class in a rich world, and nontraditional newcomer in the traditional." Needless to say, Cary faced the important challenge of balancing a number of identities.

The answer to this challenge is clear in the title of the book that chronicles her time at St. Paul's. *Black Ice* refers to what Cary believes will be the perfect world for blacks if they do not simply adopt white culture as their own out of convenience. Cary envisions a world in which her children will move with grace and ease toward success, skating on the solidity of their own culture as opposed to falling through the thinner ice of a substitute culture not strong enough to support them as aspiring black youth. Through the characters in her novels, Cary reveals her belief that blacks should form and work to meet higher standards for themselves, abandoning only those aspects of black culture that encourage youth to become drug pushers, welfare mothers, and drive-by gunslingers.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1956
- \* African-American memoirist, novelist, and journalist
- \* Her memoir, *Black Ice*, was published in 1991

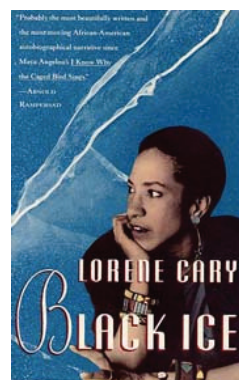
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# Lorene Cary

## Biography continued

Before *Black Ice* was published in 1991, Cary received her BA and her MA from the University of Pennsylvania. In 1979, she earned her MA in Victorian literature from the University of Sussex in England. After college, Cary worked as a writer for *Time* magazine, served as Associate Editor for *TV Guide*, and was a contributing editor at *Newsweek*. Cary's freelance work has appeared in *Obsidian*, *Mirabella*, and *Essence*. In 1983, Cary married R.C. Smith and lived in Cary's hometown of Philadelphia, with daughter Laura and stepson, Geoffrey. Cary then settled into her career as a writer.



*Black Ice* has certainly been Cary's most acclaimed work, honored by the American Library Association as one of its Notable Books in 1992. Also in 1992, Cary received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Colby College. In 1995, Cary finished her second novel, *The Price of a Child*. In this story, Ginnie Pryor escapes slavery by running away, but leaves her baby behind on the plantation. Once free, she finds herself not only having to deal with abandoning her child to the treacherous institution of slavery, but also with redefining herself as a free black woman in a still racially oppressive society. Only over time is Ginnie able to reconcile what she sacrificed for freedom by becoming a Northern abolitionist speaker named Mercer Gray who stands against slavery and racial oppression in the public sphere. The price of her child was thus matched and paid when she devoted her free life to guiding as many blacks out of slavery as possible. While Ginnie existed as a cultured black woman within the confines of the greater American system, she held fast to her memories of being a slave and, consequently, never surrendered her identity as a black woman.



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## Biography continued

Cary's third novel, *Pride*, was published in 1998. Neither an autobiography nor an historical narrative, *Pride* addresses the same theme of the black woman claiming true selfhood. It tells the story of four African-American women, all best friends since high school, on the verge of turning forty. Roz is a politician's wife battling breast cancer, Tam a college professor seeking the right romance after a string of wrong ones. Arneatha is an Episcopal priest who runs a school and a number of community programs, while Audrey is a far-from-recovering alcoholic. The plot begins with the marriage of Audrey's son to a pregnant teenage girl whom each of the women regard as "black trash," an example of some of the negative aspects of black culture. Through Roz, Tam, Arneatha, and Audrey, Cary again impresses upon her reader that black women can aim higher to escape the stereotypical life assigned to black culture. In this particular novel, Cary recognizes black sisterhood as an important part of redefining black culture as being something to take pride in rather than a disgrace.

Lorene Cary currently teaches English at her alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. She also visits universities and colleges around the world to speak on the themes illustrated in her books, specifically those based in personal experience. In her memoir *Black Ice*, Cary summarized this personal theme that appears in all of her work. She wrote, "I learned to hold myself to standards that were always just beyond my reach." As a spokeswoman for underrepresented groups struggling to succeed in a white, male majority system, Cary's literary success testifies to the possibility that awaits other African-Americans.

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

#### Books

*Pride* (Doubleday, 1998).

*The Price of a Child* (Knopf, 1995).

*Black Ice* (Knopf, 1991).



# Lorene Cary

## Selected Bibliography continued

### Works by the author continued

#### Articles

"The Dinner Hour: The Evening Meals of My Youth Served Up Nightly Lessons in Life and Family: What Will Happen With the Next Generation" (*Inquirer Magazine*, 1998).

"The Children's Crusade: The journeys of a black prep school graduate" (*Newsweek*, 1991).

"As Plain As Black and White" (*Newsweek*, 1991).

### Works about the author

Review of *Black Ice* (*Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 1991).

Review of *Black Ice* (*New York Times Book Review*, 1991).